Kenneth Roth from the Humans Rights Watch in Berlin, Germany. January 21st 2014. Alamy

Bias and Betrayal

The extensive rot at the heart of Human Rights Watch.

Gerald M. Steinberg

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Human Rights Watch (HRW) is routinely described as one of the world's most powerful non-governmental organisations (NGOs), but it is tainted by a biased political agenda and troubling questions about the ethics of its fundraising. The salience of these problems has increased in the wake of a high-visibility campaign following the

Subscribe

October 7th Hamas massacre, during which 1,200 Israelis were brutally murdered and 240 more were taken hostage.

In response to the October 7th atrocities, HRW officials rushed to condemn Israel's military campaign with repeated accusations of war crimes, apartheid, collective punishment, and similar terms. For a senior employee, who had worked at HRW for 13 years, this response crossed a moral red line, and she circulated a bitter email, confirming the pervasive bias and lack of credibility that have previously been detailed by the organisation's critics (including this author). In parallel, the publication of a leaked document appeared to show that HRW received $3.75 million from Qatar in 2018, a conflict of interest that casts further doubt on the organisation's commitment to its stated mission.

These developments raise a number of important questions: How did this organisation, established to promote the principles of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, become a world leader in political propaganda, apparently willing to accept donations from some of the world's most oppressive and brutal regimes? How did an initial emphasis on detailed and verifiable research reports on global human-rights issues degenerate into narrow political advocacy tracts?

A Changed Mission

In order to understand HRW's transformation, we should begin with its founding in 1978. The NGO was established by Robert Bernstein, the CEO of a major publishing company, after he returned from a trip to the Soviet Union where he met with prominent dissidents. Three years earlier, Washington and Moscow had signed the Helsinki Accords, which included a commitment to "respect for human rights and

fundamental freedoms," and Bernstein's new NGO (initially called Helsinki Watch) began by documenting compliance from Moscow. It quickly grew into an influential watchdog, and its reports and other activities brought international pressure to bear first on the Kremlin, and then on dictatorial regimes worldwide as its remit and operations expanded. Unlike other NGOs such as Amnesty International, which relied on claims by activists, HRW produced detailed academic-style research reports based on verifiable information.

Bernstein served as the organisation's chair until 1998, when he retired from active involvement. Five years earlier, executive director Aryeh Neier had left and Ken Roth was appointed to take his place—a position he would hold until 2022. Following the collapse of the USSR and the end of the Cold War, Roth began to pursue a very different agenda, anchored in an anti-Western, anti-American, and postcolonial ideology that was and remains popular on university campuses. This simplistic perspective divides the world—subjectively and *a priori*—into opposing groups: aggressor states that are presumptively guilty of aggression and war crimes, and victims who cannot be held accountable for even the most egregious acts of brutality and terror. Under the pretext of promoting human rights, Israel went from being a parliamentary democracy to a neocolonialist oppressor, while Palestinian terrorists—including Hamas—became decolonial activists exercising their legitimate "right of resistance" by murdering hundreds of Israeli citizens.

This ideological shift was only amplified by indications that Roth harbored personal animus toward Zionism, regardless of Israel's borders or policies, and he repeatedly attacked its use of military power in self-defense. Roth frequently refers to his father's experience as a child in Nazi Germany (until 1938) to justify these obsessive

condemnations, and makes frequent use of his social-media accounts to attack Israel. At times, he even employs a distorted text from the Jewish Bible in an effort to provide his hostility with some Jewish authenticity. In a 2006 letter to the *New York Sun*, Roth described Israel's response to a lethal Hezbollah attack as "an eye for an eye" and "the morality of some more primitive moment." In response, the *Sun* ran an editorial calling this "a slur on the Jewish religion itself that is breathtaking in its ignorance. … To suggest that Judaism is a "primitive" religion incompatible with contemporary morality is to engage in supersessionism, the de-legitimization of Judaism, the basis of much anti-Semitism."

Roth's implementation of this new agenda shifted much of the emphasis in HRW's publications and campaigns away from closed societies and dictatorships to condemnation of Western democracies, including the United States, NATO, western Europe, and Australia. HRW's reports increasingly consisted of unverifiable and often manipulated "eyewitness testimonies" and third-hand media material, at the expense of detailed, fully sourced, and verifiable research and analysis. Many of these publications and campaigns accused the US and other NATO countries of violating international humanitarian law in Iraq and Afghanistan, with minimal emphasis on the mass oppression and widespread killings conducted by, respectively, Saddam Hussein's regime and the Taliban. The inherent ambiguity of international humanitarian law, and the lack of democratic legitimacy in associated institutions like the International Criminal Court, facilitate manipulation in singling out political targets and marketing allegations of violations, particularly to journalists with little understanding of the attendant complexities.

The Middle East was not a major focus of HRW's work in its first decade, but Roth quickly prioritized the region, and specifically Israel, hiring a large staff for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) division. Many of these new staffers were radical ideologues and pro-Palestinian activists, and they composed endless reports condemning Israeli policies, while giving very little if any attention to violent neighboring dictatorships, the PLO, and other Palestinian terror groups. Along with other ideological human-rights activists, HRW built upon the antisemitic and anti-Zionist propaganda promoted by the USSR and Arab regimes during the Cold War. This in turn helped to shape debates about the Middle East at the United Nations, which produced the notorious 1975 General Assembly Resolution 3379 stipulating that "Zionism Is Racism." Although that resolution was repealed in 1991, the accompanying UN committees and funding mechanisms for demonizing Israel remain.

In early September 2001, the campaign to disparage Israel and Zionism resumed at the UN Conference on Racism, held in Durban, South Africa, where officials from 1,500 NGOs adopted a Final Declaration and Plan of Action calling for the "complete international isolation of Israel as an apartheid state." As Congressman Tom Lantos, a Holocaust survivor and member of the US delegation, subsequently reported, HRW played a prominent role in this travesty, and joined other NGO delegates in blocking the participation of Jewish organisations. In media interviews, Roth was defiant. "Clearly Israeli racist practices are an appropriate topic," he declared.

After Durban, HRW led other NGOs and allied UN officials in condemning Israel as it sought to end the terror attacks launched by Palestinian groups against its citizens. Allegations of Israeli war crimes increased, accompanied by major media campaigns, particularly

following the counter-terror operation in Jenin in 2002. In 2004, Roth hired political activist Sarah Leah Whitson to head HRW's MENA division. Following a lethal Iranian-supported cross-border attack by Hezbollah terrorists during the 2006 Lebanon war, HRW published a continuous stream of press statements and reports filled with accusations against Israel, unsupported by credible and verifiable evidence and based on international legal claims that were either inventions or aspirational interpretations.

Roth and Whitson were adept at exploiting the opportunities presented by the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in Geneva and the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague. The regional structure of the UNHRC provides the 56-member Islamic bloc with control over the agenda, appointments, resolutions, and investigations. For the Islamic countries (including Iran, Algeria, Syria, and others), the centrality of accusations against Israel helped to direct attention away from criticism or investigations of their own dismal human-rights records. HRW has a very active presence in Geneva (including fundraising and board members), meets regularly with country delegates and appointees, submits "reports" to the UNHRC, takes the floor as a recognized NGO during Council sessions, and holds press conferences in the UN compound. And although the ICC has a different structure and appointments process, it is also a very friendly platform for promoting HRW and reinforcing the Durban agenda.

In 2009, the first Gaza war between Hamas and Israel broke out, following intense rocket bombardment of Israeli population centers from the enclave. During the conflict, HRW was a central actor in the UNHRC emergency session that established a one-sided commission to investigate alleged Israeli war crimes. Richard Goldstone, a Jewish jurist from South Africa and a member of HRW's international advisory

board, was selected to head this commission. Its findings were a foregone conclusion. HRW (along with Amnesty International and many smaller NGOs claiming human-rights agendas) actively shaped the proceedings and the collection of "evidence." Goldstone later acknowledged that the report bearing his name was based on false and inaccurate accusations, but by then the damage was done.

For Roth and HRW, the role of international humanitarian law as a political and ideological weapon, and its embodiment in the threat of ICC investigations and prosecutions, have aided HRW's influence since the negotiation of the Rome Statute that established the ICC in 2000. The illusion of a binding form of international law—determined by unaccountable judges and prosecutors appointed through an opaque process in which powerful NGOs like HRW would play a decisive role—is a key feature of the postcolonial anti-Western agenda. On this basis, Roth led an intense pressure campaign in a failed attempt to gain the accession of the United States.

In addition, in hundreds of press statements, news interviews, and social-media posts, Roth and HRW successfully lobbied the ICC prosecutor to recognize Palestine as an actual country (the Palestinians only have the status of a non-voting observer at the UN), and to open investigations into Israeli conduct. Both HRW and the ICC insisted that evidence of Palestinian war crimes would also be subject to investigation, creating an appearance of even-handedness. In practice, however, the resources in the legal battlefront are primarily focused on branding Israelis as violators ("war criminals"). The Palestinians are not affected by being potentially labeled as war criminals in Western countries, unlike millions of Israelis who serve in the military and also travel internationally for business and pleasure.

“Rights Watchdog, Lost in the Mideast”

In 2009, the growing impact of HRW’s activities led Robert Bernstein to publicly denounce the organisation he had created more than three decades earlier. After numerous discreet attempts to influence Roth and the organisation’s agenda failed, Bernstein was forced to conclude that HRW had lost its direction and moral bearings. In an essay for the *New York Times* titled “Rights Watchdog, Lost in the Mideast,” he declared that he had “joined the group’s critics.” HRW, he argued, was misusing its resources and influence to target open societies and democratic governments instead of closed societies and oppressive regimes, and “helping those who wish to turn Israel into a pariah state.” In a subsequent speech at the University of Nebraska, he went into further detail, accusing Roth and other leaders of abusing their positions.

However, Bernstein’s public criticisms had very little long-term impact on Roth and HRW. On the contrary, the group only accelerated and amplified its new ideological agenda, continuing its disproportionate criticisms of Israel, the US, and other Western democracies. Following al-Qaeda’s terror attacks on the US on September 11th, 2001, and then in London on July 7th, 2005, HRW issued numerous reports and statements giving far more attention to the “abusive reaction” to the attacks than to Islamist terrorism. According to HRW, “Instead of reaffirming the human rights standards that prohibit such instrumental cruelty, the administration of President George W. Bush shredded them.” In 2011, Roth also criticized the US military action that killed Osama bin Laden as a violation of international law. It made countless statements like these.

The attacks on Israel continued to expand, particularly in relation to the repeated clashes between Israel and Hamas. In 2016, Roth and Whitson hired an accomplished anti-Israel activist named Omar Shakir to be its Israel and Palestine Country Director. Shakir continues to occupy that position and has been HRW's most visible spokesperson condemning Israel's response in Gaza following the October 7th massacre. In addition to promoting discriminatory boycotts of Israel, Shakir, Roth, and others have ramped up HRW's effort to stigmatize Israel as an apartheid state. In 2021, the organisation published a paper titled, "A Threshold Crossed: Israeli Authorities and the Crimes of Apartheid and Persecution." Campaigns like these drew the attention of HRW's critics, but did not have any visible impact on the organisation and its supporters.

The scale and savagery of the Hamas massacre on October 7th, 2023, and HRW's subsequent promotion of the international campaign to condemn Israel's military response in Gaza, triggered an unprecedented reaction. Danielle Haas, a HRW senior editor since 2010, sent a public email to all 600 staff members on her last day on the job condemning the organisation's hypocrisy and immorality. Haas's email constitutes the most serious threat to HRW's carefully manicured reputation since the Bernstein op-ed in 2009.

Haas confirmed—and provided examples of—the "years of politicization" that has stained all of HRW's activities, particularly in relation to Israel. The organisation's conduct, she correctly noted, violates "basic editorial standards related to rigor, balance, and collegiality." She added that HRW's response to the October 7th Hamas massacre invoked "the 'context' of 'apartheid' and 'occupation' before blood was even dry on bedroom walls" and "could easily be construed as blaming the victim." Although Haas did not mention Ken Roth by

name, his 29-year obsession with Israel was apparent in her description of the "shattered professionalism, abandoned principles of accuracy and fairness," and the multiple ways in which HRW has "surrendered its duty to stand for the human rights of all."

Recalling HRW's 2021 "apartheid" campaign, Haas observed that HRW staff knew perfectly well that the 217-page report, filled with pseudo-research, legal-sounding jargon, and propaganda, "would rarely be read in full. And there is little doubt it has not been by those—including Hamas supporters—who now bandy about the [apartheid] term with appalling ease." This is as much an indictment of the journalists and other consumers who turned HRW's press release into major headlines as it is of the organisation's own manipulative practices. On the day the report was made public, the *New York Times* headlined its article "Rights Group Hits Israel With Explosive Charge: Apartheid."

For those who have followed HRW's 20-year history of manipulation and moral corruption under Ken Roth, none of this was surprising. But, as with other examples of whistle-blowing, the importance of Haas's insider revelations is that they confirmed the analysis of outsiders. The personal testimony about the extensive rot at the heart of HRW from within the organisation is now far more difficult to whitewash or deny.

Following the HRW Money

HRW is now a non-governmental superpower, with an annual budget of close to $100 million, and this money allows it to direct the media coverage and academic discourse on human rights and international law. Roth's long tenure as executive director was characterized by major expansion of HRW's available funds, and these have enabled the

organisation's metamorphosis into a powerful industry without significant oversight or checks and balances.

In 2009, following Bernstein's public condemnations, a number of important donors pulled out and there were resignations from the board that oversees the organisation. Bernstein expected that this would severely curtail Roth's power and lead to his resignation and replacement. Instead, Roth not only secured alternative sources of funding, but he also greatly increased the annual budget and added a large endowment. Initially, the support that Roth needed in order to keep HRW afloat came from George Soros, an American billionaire whose Open Society Foundation funds progressive political causes and organisations. By 2009, HRW was reporting expenses of $43 million, and two years later, that amount had jumped to $56.4 million. By 2021, the figure stood at $91 million. In addition to the annual budget, HRW reported total assets of $256.6 million at the end of 2021—two and half times the budget.

In parallel, Roth sent his MENA division director Sarah Leah Whitson to meet with Arab regime leaders, none of whom could be accurately described as interested in human rights. In 2009, Whitson went to Saudi Arabia, seeking funds to counter "pro-Israel pressure groups in the US, the European Union and the United Nations," and then to Libya where she announced that the Gaddafi family were "human rights reformers." Other stops and additional fundraising trips have not been disclosed. The NGO began to hide its full list of donors, and in 2010, it opened an office in Beirut, headed by Nadim Houry, who had been Whitson's deputy. Loubna Freih, who has been associated with HRW since 2001, and is a member of the governing board, was also involved in the Beirut operation. (Freih, whose brief biography on the HRW websites states that she was "born in Iraq, of Saudi origin," is also on

the board of the Carr Center for Human Rights at the Kennedy School at Harvard University, which provided Ken Roth with a fellowship in 2022 after he announced his retirement from HRW. This followed an intense lobbying campaign on Roth's behalf after the dean vetoed the proposed appointment.)

HRW, Roth and Whitson repeatedly denied reports that they received funding from Middle East autocrats and their allies. In 2020, however, a leaked internal document revealed that, in 2012, HRW had accepted a $470,000 "donation" from a well-connected Saudi billionaire named Mohamed bin Issa al-Jaber, whose company had previously been exposed by HRW for abuse of its employees. Photos of Roth, Whitson and al-Jaber appeared to confirm the connection. The conditions of the donation, according to the document, included the stipulation that the gift would not be used to support gay rights in the Middle East. Following the 2020 revelation, HRW issued a statement calling the decision to accept the grant "deeply regrettable" and adding that it "stood in stark contrast to our core values and our longstanding commitment to LGBT rights as an integral part of human rights." But this revelation raised the possibility that similar donations involving Arab dictatorships remained hidden in HRW's closet.

That question was apparently answered in November 2023, when the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) posted a leaked January 2018 letter allegedly authorizing the "additional" transfer of three million Euros (about $US 3.75 million at the time) from Qatar to HRW. That reference to additional funding implied previous transfers. Marc Eichinger, "a former French intelligence agent" and analyst of "Qatar's alleged financing of Islamist terrorist movements" stated that Natalie Lundgren, HRW's Development and Outreach Manager, previously worked for the Qatar Foundation on one of its international

influence and soft-power projects (WISE—World Innovation Summit for Education). The foundation is directed by Sheikha Moza, a powerful member of the Qatari royal family with a "viciously anti-Israel" agenda, reflected in social-media posts and speeches at pro-Palestinian events. (HRW's profile of Lundgren omits her Qatari employment.)

Qatar is a closed and highly repressive society, ranked 25/100 on the Freedom House democracy index, and its ruling family are well-known to be supporters of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, which officials believe to be "a legitimate resistance movement." Whitson's abrupt departure from HRW in 2020 coincided with the leak revealing the Saudi funding. After a very short stop at the Quincy Institute (a US-based think tank that specializes in massaging the image of the Iranian regime), she moved to a new organisation named Democracy for the Arab World Now (DAWN), from which she has continued to attack Israel. As in the case of HRW, many of the donors to Whitson and DAWN are anonymous, but support from Qatar would not be surprising. Whether these revelations lead to investigations of Roth, Whitson, and others under the US Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) remains to be seen.

Whither HRW?

When the various strands are brought together, it appears that the carefully curated image of morality, known as the "halo effect," that has protected HRW from serious scrutiny for many years has frayed, perhaps beyond repair. Pressure will hopefully now increase for a full and independent investigation of HRW's finances and donors, and of the culpability of board members who aided Roth and Whitson in hiding information on funding from foreign sources. As a result, private foundations concerned about their own reputations might well decide

to withhold funding, and new sources are likely to avoid associating with HRW as long as the current leadership remains in control.

Whistleblower Danielle Haas's revelations and confirmation of the organisation's well-documented history of political bias may also encourage further disclosures from other current or former staff members, thereby offering more evidence of the organisation's hollow claims of expertise. HRW's efforts to downplay the brutality of the October 7th Hamas massacre, and its campaign to block the demilitarization of Gaza with false allegations of Israeli "war crimes," highlight the destructive impact of this morally inverted version of human rights and international law. The evidence pointing to decades of anti-American and anti-Israel propaganda in the guise of legitimate research is becoming too difficult to ignore.

If this is the case, and the recognition of failure and its consequences leads to a full house-cleaning, it is possible that under new management HRW could return to the moral foundations of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the principles its founder Robert Bernstein sought to uphold in 1978. But the obstacles remain formidable.

Politics | Human Rights | Israel

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Gerald M. Steinberg is the founder and president of NGO Monitor. His most recent book is ‘Last book: Menachem Begin & the Israel-Egypt Peace Process; Next: Human Rights and Soft Power War’

Member discussion

13 comments

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GS

George Scialabba

Yesterday

PS - Steinberg offhandedly dismisses Human Rights Watch's 217-page report on Israeli apartheid, though without actually engaging with it, as though the mere imputation is absurd and prima facie evidence of bias. Does he feel the same way about the very similar reports from Amnesty International, "Israel's apartheid against Palestinians: Cruel system of domination and crime against humanity" (https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde15/5141/2022/en/) and B'Tselem, "A regime of Jewish supremacy from the Jordan River to the MediterraneanSea: This is apartheid" (https://www.btselem.org/sites/default/files/publications/202101_this_is_apartheid_eng.pdf)? An international anti-Semitic conspiracy of human rights organizations?

♡ 0

BA

Ben A

2 hours ago

So your takeaway is that because the apartheid regime classification is supported by other organizations none of the various conflicts of interest surrounding HRW (that largely create headwinds for Israel and its reputation) aren't a concern at all?

♡ 0

GS

George Scialabba

One hour ago

No, Ben, my takeaway is that because, in the four cases I cited, the author's criticisms are inaccurate or misjudged, one should take his overall argument with several grains of salt. Also, I thought Quillette readers, subjected to a

continuous and unmodulated barrage of pro-Israel propaganda, ought to know that there's a fairly wide consensus in the rest of the world that Israel is an apartheid state.

♡ 0

T2 **Trotter 27**

Yesterday

The real joke is that most of these NGOs like HRW, Amnesty Intl and especially the United Nations council on human rights only care about criticizing, western pluralistic democracies like the US, Canada, NATO countries, etc. they turn a blind eye to despotic regimes, especially in the Islamic world. Regimes that subjugate women, sanction honor killings and promote the death penalty for LGBT people, and apostates that want to leave the religion. I wonder if it has anything to do with funding that comes from the same despots. The other joke, not too funny in my opinion, is that Iran is now the chair of the UN council for human rights. The joke is on all of us.

♡ 13

MM **Mark Miles**

Yesterday

That reminds me of something Bret Weinstein said he learned from the Evergreen College episode. Before the episode the faculty seemed to be a like-minded group of liberals. What the Evergreen episode revealed is that there is a distinct division between liberals who criticize the system to promote progress toward universal enlightenment values and those who simply want to invert the existing hierarchy with them and their allies now on top.

♡ 4

JV **Jim Veenbaas**

Yesterday

NGOs are a pernicious and destructive influence on democracies around the world. They are accountable to no one and often have

opaque funding sources. By their very nature, they give the appearance of grassroots support, when in fact many of them are nothing more than front groups for wealthy ideologues trying to push their own agenda. Their role in the political process has greatly expanded and they have become powerful lobby groups. We need greater transparency and stricter regulations on the operations of NGOs.

♡ 7

D

DataDriven

Yesterday · Edited

NGOs making political donations to individual politicians or political parties should be required to provide detailed audit trails showing exactly their money came from. If they want to do something else with their money, fine, but if they're purchasing

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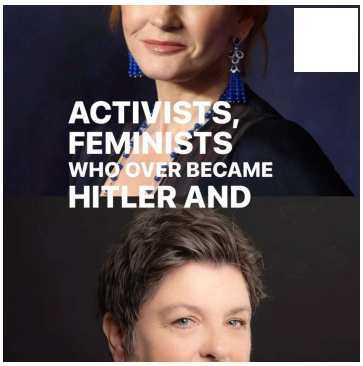

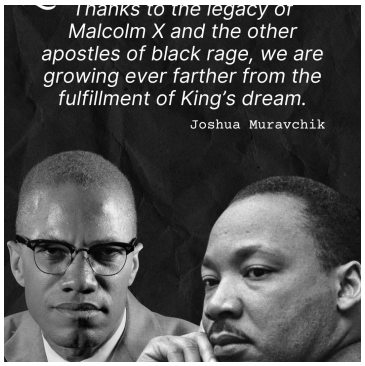

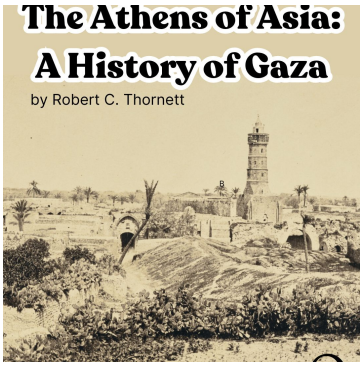

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